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SUBJECT: CONGRESSMAN SMITH DISCUSSES RELIGIOUS FREEDOM WITH VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Visiting Congressman (and Vice-Chairman of the House International Relations Committee) Christopher Smith (R-NJ) met with Vietnamese government officials, and Catholic, Protestant and Buddhist leaders in Hanoi on December 2. Principal issues discussed were improvements and challenges for religious freedom in Vietnam and the status of development of faith-based charitable institutions. End Summary.

Committee on Religious Affairs

2. (SBU) On December 2, Congressman Smith met with Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) Vice Chairman Nguyen The Dzoanh to discuss religious freedom in Vietnam. Dzoanh monopolized the conversation with a rambling explication about his family, time served in the Vietminh and the 50-generation history of religion in Vietnamese society that concluded with the bold assertion that there are "absolutely no religious conflict or concerns in Vietnam." He stated that the CRA respects the ideals and philosophies of all religions, but noted that Vietnam's geo-strategic position makes concerns for "national unity" paramount. Nevertheless, the GVN is trying to return to Ho Chi Minh's "enlightened stance on the role of religion, particularly Catholicism, in Vietnam", Dzoanh said.

Catholics: Mass Ordination...

3. (SBU) Later on December 2, Congressman Smith and the Ambassador met with Hanoi Archbishop Ngo Quang Kiet. An Office of the National Assembly representative insisted on observing the meeting despite the delegation's request for a private discussion. Nonetheless, Kiet provided a frank review of recent advances in religious freedom from the perspective of Vietnam's Catholics. He noted some significant improvements, including the fact that all bishoprics are now filled and the GVN has allowed annual enrollment at the Saint Joseph's Seminary instead of semi-annual. He also noted that Vatican Missionary Minister Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe recently visited Vietnam to participate in the ordination of 57 new priests on November 27 in front of the Hanoi Cathedral. This was the very first visit of a ranking Vatican official to Vietnam at the invitation of the Vietnam Episcopal Council. However, while the GVN's agreement to allow the mass ordination and Sepe's visit represent significant improvements in Vatican/GVN relations, these advances are "not adequate" and have not met all the needs of Vietnamese Catholics. In particular, the Church is frustrated that no ecclesiastical properties seized by the Government in 1954 have been returned, despite repeated requests. In the face of continuing resistance on this issue, the Vatican has decided to focus on asking for the return of the property that originally housed the Office of the Pontifical Envoy in Hanoi. In addition to past properties, the Catholic Church also needs new houses of worship in traditionally non-Catholic areas because of the continuing and increasing internal migration of Catholics within Vietnam.

...Social Work...

4. (SBU) Kiet also noted that Cardinal Sepe made an official request in his meeting with Prime Minister Phan Van Khai for permission to publish a Catholic journal in Vietnam, and for the church to become more involved in charitable education and medicine. At present, the Church is allowed to operate kindergartens and pharmacies, but no higher-level schools and no clinics or hospitals. Moreover, two orders of nuns, one of which was founded by Mother Theresa, tried unsuccessfully for almost three years to establish HIV/AIDS hospices in Vietnam, but gave up several years ago in the face of bureaucratic reluctance to grant them permission (although they are willing to return if the GVN creates a more supportive climate). That said, Catholics are not completely discouraged, as there have been positive developments in these areas as well. For example, 100 monks are now allowed to work in an HIV/AIDS hospice near HCMC. In sum, Kiet asserted that the GVN has been working to

improve religious freedom for Catholics, which has resulted in "some new things," and that Church leaders hope the GVN will soon agree that religion and charitable work are a good thing for society.

15. (SBU) Congressman Smith stated that one of his messages to GVN officials had been that the charitable work of religious institutions would make Vietnam a better place, adding that 25 percent of all hospitals in the United States are run by Catholic charities. Even the Government of Ethiopia understands that religious institutions provide a valuable service to mankind. The GVN thus has no reason to fear faith-based organizations. He also noted that Mother Theresa is revered in Congress and that, "if my colleagues knew that her nuns ran into resistance trying to set up a charity in Vietnam, they'd be outraged." The Congress will work very hard to persuade the GVN to become more tolerant of religious charities and the Catholic Church should work with the Embassy to build new social programs because of the USG's strong emphasis on aid to faith-based charities. The Ambassador noted that the new ordinance on religion has opened a door for charitable work, but the Catholics need to push through that door. If the Church comes up with concrete proposals, the Embassy will do its best to support them, he said, but "it won't be possible if we don't push." The Archbishop asked that the Ambassador meet with the nuns of Mother Theresa if they return to Vietnam. The Ambassador consented and also offered to raise the issue of expropriated properties at the national and local levels.

...and Family Planning and TIP

16. (SBU) Turning to other issues, Congressman Smith asked whether the GVN's "two-child policy" and social predilection for boys have pressured Catholics into sex-selection abortions in Vietnam, as similar policies have in China and elsewhere. The Archbishop explained that the policy is less strict in Vietnam, with pressure on population control mainly coming from the mass media. There are no fines or other punishments for having more than two children, he said. (Note: Government employees may be subject to small fines, but the imposition of such fines is inconsistent. End note.) On abortion, the Congressman noted that faith-based pregnancy-care and pregnancy-crisis centers are very powerful weapons in the fight against abortion. Kiet explained that the Church does not operate crisis centers in Vietnam, but "as Catholics, we have been trying to help dissuade women from having abortions."

17. (SBU) Congressman Smith also raised the issue of trafficking in persons, and exhorted the Archbishop to work through a new Vatican/Congressional initiative to promote anti-trafficking education "from the pulpit." He noted that this is a particularly important project as local church involvement in this issue has proven very successful at preventing trafficking in the first place, alleviating the need to rehabilitate victims after the fact.

18. (SBU) At the end of the meeting, the Ambassador asked if prospects for GVN/Vatican reconciliation are better after Cardinal Sepe's visit. Kiet answered that prospects are better, and both sides wish to establish diplomatic relations, but true reconciliation will not come soon.

Protestants: Faith-based Charities...

19. (SBU) On the same day, the Ambassador hosted a lunch for Congressman Smith, Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN) President Phung Quang Huyen, ECVN General Secretary Pastor Au Quang Vinh, Haiphong Pastor Nguyen Gia Huyen and Bui Binh Thi of the ECVN's Executive Board. In response to the Ambassador's question regarding the possibility of the ECVN becoming active in faith-based charities in Vietnam, particularly in the area of HIV/AIDS treatment, Vinh explained that, in addition to needing a better legal framework to make such charitable work possible, the ECVN needs greater institutional strength. In the past, Protestants were focused on survival, but the ECVN is now expanding its capacity and working to change its image. For example, some followers in the provinces are now working with foreign NGOs that focus on HIV/AIDS treatment and advocacy. Hopefully, the ECVN will establish more provincial programs like these, with the GVN's assistance as local officials continue to become more receptive. The ECVN is thus glad that the USG is providing significant support for HIV/AIDS projects in Vietnam. The hope is that ECVN followers will be able to get training to help AIDS victims, Vinh said. Charitable work is new for Vietnam's Protestants, but they are encouraged by the support they have received in this endeavor from faith-based NGOs.

110. (SBU) The Ambassador asked the ECVN to keep the Embassy apprised of its charitable plans as they develop and suggested that the ECVN look into programs aimed at reducing

the social stigmas against people living HIV/AIDS as well as in prevention and education. The ECVN should also consider programs aimed at countering trafficking in persons, although there are limits to the time and money the Embassy can commit to support any development projects. Nevertheless, such programs could help the growing number of northern Protestants establish congregations in areas that have been less receptive to their followers. Congressman Smith noted the effectiveness of faith-based initiatives in working to combat social evils and improve religious freedom. Mr. Thi interjected that recent progress in religious freedom has been exaggerated and held up the example of the GVN's reluctance to give congregants the right to repair the ECVN church in Thanh Hoa Province. Vinh observed, however, that the more difficult the situation, the stronger the ECVN's followers' belief in God. Returning to faith-based charitable work, Vinh noted that one ECVN member has already developed a proposal for a program to support HIV/AIDS victims, which he promised to send to the Embassy.

...Religious Freedom...

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11. (SBU) The Ambassador asked Vinh for an assessment of the situation in the Northwest Highlands, particularly with regard to the friction between Christianity and traditional beliefs among ethnic minorities there. Vinh explained that there are now 1,050 ECVN sub-congregations in the Northwest Highlands, but no churches. The 117,000 followers in the area still meet in "house churches," and there are at least 17,000 followers in Lai Chau and Dien Bien provinces alone despite repeated assertions on the part of local officials that there are no Protestants under their administration. Followers are able to meet openly in some areas, and the ECVN is currently sending letters requesting official registration for these groups because local authorities are now willing to talk to Protestants. The ECVN's intention is to first ask for church registration for Protestant groups that are not afraid to "show" their faith. It is like a test, Vinh said, adding that the remaining groups that have not submitted their applications are waiting to see how the GVN handles those requests. If their requests are turned down, it is likely that the rest may choose not to go for registration because of their fear of repression.

12. (SBU) Congressman Smith asked what happens when officials refuse registration requests. Pastor Vinh said that responses in many areas had not been favorable at first, and followers were frightened of unintended consequences. The ECVN has been meeting with recalcitrant local officials to educate them about the GVN's new policies on religion. Many other districts have been amenable to registration. ECVN President Huyen observed that some local officials have been helpful by being silent, but in other locations, especially Lao Cai and Ha Giang provinces, officials have treated followers badly. The Congressman asked if the ECVN has ever asked the Prime Minister to visit a church or church conference to convince him to give direct support to their cause. Vinh answered that while Prime Minister Khai may have good feelings about religions in Vietnam, he must ultimately listen to the will of the Party. If many Party officials change their minds about religion, then we can expect real change, Vinh said. The Ambassador noted that to effect such a change requires steady, regular and persistent attention, and he encouraged church leaders to bring problems to the Embassy's attention to aid our efforts to keep the pressure on.

Buddhists

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13. (SBU) In a separate meeting December 2, Congressman Smith met with the Most Venerable Thich Thanh Tu of the (GVN-recognized) Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha (VBS). This meeting was largely disjointed, as Tu responded to Smith's questions with a series of rambling non-sequiturs and an extensive list of the various officials of the VBS, both past and present. Tu claimed only two monks had left the VBS and admitted there were no theological differences between the VBS and UBCV. Smith urged that with the PM's effort to open up on religious freedom, Tu find space for Thich Quang Do, and noted that unity should not be the highest value, but mutual respect, tolerance, love and co-existence. When asked about the VBS's relationship with United Buddhist Church of Vietnam's (UBCV) Thich Quang Do and Thich Tien Hanh, Tu took pains to explain that it is the aspiration of all Buddhists to form a unified organization. He asserted that the VBS has tried to live in harmony with these two even though they have rejected unity. For example, the VBS has provided lodging for Do and Hanh on numerous occasions in VBS headquarters. Tu would not comment on this issue further and returned to his original, unfocused presentation.

14. (SBU) Congressman Smith has cleared this message.

